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S E C R E T RIYADH 009433

SIPDIS

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DHAHRAN SENDS  
PARIS FOR ZEYA, LONDON FOR TSOU

E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/21/2015

TAGS: PREL PGOV SA

SUBJECT: HASSAN AL-SAFFAR CONTINUES TO DECLINE TO MEET USG  
OFFICIALS BUT SEEKS US VISA

Classified by Consul General John Kincannon for reasons 1.4  
(b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Post has requested a meeting with Shi'ite cleric and leader Hassan Al-Saffar through several intermediaries, principally Salman and Nathir Al-Jishi. Al-Saffar is generally agreed by most of post's interlocutors to be the preeminent leader in the Saudi Shi'a community and the primarily, but not sole, intermediary between the Shi'a community and the Saudi government. For years, Al-Saffar has shunned contacts with American diplomats and has turned us down again, most recently saying, according to Nathir Al-Jishi, "U.S. diplomats will gain nothing by meeting me, at least at the present time, and I may stand to lose a lot." The Jishi brothers have said several times to consulate officers that Al-Saffar is a "national figure" who does not wish to engage with diplomats. "He would not meet with the Iranian Ambassador if he requested it," Nathir, who worked as an assistant to Al-Saffar for several years, told us.

¶2. (C) On the other hand, Al-Saffar is seeking a visa to the United States. He contacted post through intermediaries during Ramadan, sharing a letter of invitation from Dr. Ned Fawaz, chairman of the Islamic Center of America in Dearborn, Michigan. As he hoped to spend the end of Ramadan in the U.S., post advised Al-Saffar that he would not be able to get a visa in time, and he withdrew the request temporarily. He has since made clear that he wishes to pursue the visa application.

¶3. (S) Comment: Al-Saffar's reply to our request for a meeting can be read in several different ways. He may be concerned that meeting with us would raise his profile enough to upset whatever accommodation he and the SAG have. He likely also has ties with clerics and leaders in Iran, who would view any meeting between us with suspicion. End comment.

¶4. (C) Bio note: Al-Saffar is a Shi'ite cleric who went into exile in Iran and Syria following the SAG crackdown on Shi'ite rioting in 1979. He returned to the Kingdom in the mid-1990s, having reached an understanding with the Saudi government. According to his passport, Al-Saffar was born on January 20, 1958. End bio note.

(APPROVED: KINCANNON)  
GFOELLER